

## US lifts immigration restrictions for Cuban doctors

Sara Carrillo de Albornoz London

The United States has announced a change in its immigration policy, with immediate effect, that promotes legal and safe immigration to the US for Cuban medical personnel in third countries. This new measure affects more than 20 000 Cuban doctors currently working in more than 70 countries around the world, mostly in Venezuela. Until now, the only way they could go to the US was as illegal immigrants, claiming political asylum on arrival. The new arrangement will allow them to enter the country legally.

This announcement was made in a climate of uncertainty over the health of Cuba's president, Fidel Castro, and the future of the country as a communist state. President Castro was admitted to hospital with intestinal bleeding in July and handed over power to his brother Raúl, who maintains that Fidel is recovering and Cuba is living a "situation of serenity."

About half of Cuba's doctors are sent to work abroad. In Venezuela, roughly 15 000 Cuban doctors work in the project Misión Barrio Adentro [Into The Neighbourhood]. The project is promoted by Venezuelan

president Hugo Chávez to improve health care in the poorest areas and is sustained by Cuban doctors. In exchange, Cuba receives 90 000 barrels of oil a day.

Dr Luis Carlos Silva Aycaquer, currently the director of the Cuban public health journal *Revista Cubana de Salud Pública* ([www.sld.cu/sitios/reviewsalud](http://www.sld.cu/sitios/reviewsalud)), told the *BMJ*, "The US is taking advantage of the situation to cause chaos and conflict... This decision is part of the US strategy to block our country

economically, commercially, and financially, maintained for 47 years." He adds, "The measure is also directed to harm the altruistic service that Cuban doctors offer to populations affected by natural disasters."

Each year since 1992 the United Nations General Assembly has approved a resolution condemning the US embargo against Cuba. In 1998, resolution 52/143 was also approved to denounce the continuing violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms in Cuba.

Many Cubans flee illegally to the US, and Miami has a substantial Cuban population. Through its programme Barrio Afuera [Out of the Neighbourhood], Solidarity Without Borders, a Miami based organi-

sation, helps Cuban doctors who defect. Julio César Alfonso, its president, said, "Cuban doctors are treated as slaves, sent to the most inhospitable places, constantly monitored, and manipulated by the Cuban government." Dr Alfonso warns they are expecting an "avalanche" of Cuban doctors trying to defect. He fears that the Venezuelan government might not allow Cuban doctors to fly to the US.

Dr Alfonso is having talks with Florida congressman Lincoln Diaz-Balart, who is running for the forthcoming Florida elections in November, to give priority to cases of doctors who have already defected and are waiting for a US visa in third countries. □



AP/EMPICS

Venezuela's President Hugo Chávez meets Fidel Castro in hospital on 13 August 2006

## Business booms at NHS Direct

Rebecca Coombes London

NHS Direct, the nurse led telephone and internet advice service in England and Wales, has released performance figures that show business is booming—despite plans to close call centres and axe nurse adviser posts.

As a consultation closed last week on proposals to radically shake up the service, figures from NHS Direct show that calls were up 8% in July from the previous month, with advisers handling almost 560 000 health inquiries from the public.

An NHS Direct spokesman said that the figure has been released to allay fears that reorganisation would hit perfor-

mance: "We wanted to reassure primary care trust commissioners who may be concerned that we have still got a quality service during this time of change. We have proved that the service has been maintained and improved."

The service is trying to save £15m (£22m; \$28m) by cutting nearly 800 posts and 12 call centres.

Hamish Meldrum, the chairman of the BMA's General Practitioners Committee, said that the high number of calls in July could be down to the extreme hot weather: "There were special circumstances last month. The hot weather caused a health scare, and the public were being advised to call NHS Direct.

There were lots of adverts out. So I'm not surprised that last month's calls were especially high."

Dr Meldrum said that doctors in general practice still regarded NHS Direct as poor value for money.

"We are not against a helpline to take unnecessary work away from GPs, but I think we still feel it is an expensive organisation. It still costs more per call than the average GP consultation, especially as NHS Direct tends to deal with more trivial matters. Not enough work has been done on the overall impact of NHS Direct and cost effectiveness."

Some critics said that NHS Direct services were already overstretched, even before the proposed cuts.

Research last year for consumer publication *Which?* found that some people experienced difficulties in getting through at busy times, and

many people also waited a long time for their promised call back from nurse advisers.

Frances Blunden, principal policy adviser for *Which?*, commented, "NHS Direct is not fulfilling its role adequately at the moment, and the proposed cuts to the service will only make this situation worse. The fact that there is to be no public consultation on proposals to close NHS Direct call centres and cut nurse adviser posts is outrageous."

Dr Mike Sadler, NHS Direct's chief operating officer, said, "We want to maintain and build on these high service levels and restructuring will allow us to do that because using smart telephone and computer technology allows us to work from fewer larger sites and improve efficiency and operate more effectively." □